



CITY SAVVY

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Grow your own healthy food: City promotes self sufficiency



Photo by Jason Pickrell

Wendy Kelsey, a founder of Urban Harvest, plants vegetables in the victory garden planters in Tranquility Park. The garden educates Houstonians about the advantages of growing their food.

By Andrew Guy Jr.

Walking through downtown Houston the last six months, pedestrians have looked at more than concrete skyscrapers. A lot of greenery has cropped up, especially around city buildings.

And it's not by accident.

During the opening of the city's victory garden in Tranquility Park, Mayor Annise Parker stressed the need to educate Houstonians about the advantages of growing their food and plants.

"We have a growing season that lasts at least 10 months," Parker said. "We need to show our citizens ways they can take advantage of that. I have an herb garden at my home."

The opening of the victory garden was the latest phase of the plan to create a more sustainable city by showing Houstonians how to grow their food. Other projects include the vegetable garden at the Bob Lanier Public Works Building, 611 Walker Street, and a weekly farmers market where local vendors sell their produce.

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Legally well-rounded

City attorneys do more than punish criminals

By Dave Schafer

A halfway house was operating in a private residence. Another house had a wrecker in the front. A third house had garbage piled on the front yard.

The neighbors were not happy.

Five pages of Louis Rossitto's legal-size notepad were filled with addresses and complaints. Rossitto wrote them as he and his supervisor, Donna Edmonson, toured the neighborhood with residents and neighborhood protection.

Rossitto and Edmonson are city attorneys in the neighborhood services section. Neighborhood protection had been citing violators, but that was all it could do. So Rossitto and Edmonson met with residents, and they'll deal with the complaints. The ones they can't legally handle, they'll send on to people who can, said Edmonson, section chief. They'll make sure those complaints get resolved.

"It's a different approach than you expect from the Legal Department and lawyers. But it's been successful," Rossitto said. "These

issues have been a constant source of irritation for the residents. So they appreciate anything we can do to help."

For the Legal Department, a day's work is about more than punishing criminals for class C misdemeanors and protecting the city's interests. It also involves working with residents and city departments to improve quality of life.

In the courtroom

When the courthouse opens at 8 a.m., lawyers in the municipal prosecution section are ready.

Among them are Lloyd Segall, senior assistant city attorney III, and Eric Sarrafian, assistant city attorney. Most cases are minor traffic cases, Sarrafian said. Others are not-so-minor traffic violations and noncompliance of city ordinances.

Each of the city's eight jury courts handles up to 200 cases a day, with one prosecutor working each court. Bench or non-jury courts handle 250-300 cases. Nearly all cases will be

See **LEGAL** on page 6

Escaping the gang life

Anti-gang intern reaches out to students with life lessons



Photo by Dave Schafer

Angel Ponce uses personal experiences when he speaks to students about the consequences of gang life.

By Dave Schafer

For 90 seconds, 10-year-old Angel Ponce stood there while five "friends" beat him.

See **ANTI-GANG** on page 2

Parker continues push for a green and sustainable city



Mayor Annise Parker

Go green!

Environmentally friendly initiatives have been key projects of previous administrations. Former mayors have expanded

curbside recycling citywide, retrofitted municipal buildings and purchased hybrid vehicles to save fuel.

Mayor Annise Parker is continuing that trend. The city has launched the first annual Green Office Challenge, an outreach to businesses to reduce energy consumption, waste generation and water use.

"We're challenging businesses to do what we've done with the city," Parker said. "We want them to do things such as changing light bulbs to more energy efficient ones, putting in timers for lights, that sort of thing."

The challenge is not only about saving money and improving the environment, it's also important for human health and

well-being, Parker said. It will bring sustainability experts together with businesses and property managers to learn and engage in green building practices through free workshops and training.

So far, six management districts have signed on: Downtown, Greenspoint, Upper Kirby/Greenway, the Energy Corridor, Westchase and Uptown/Galleria.

Participants' milestones will be measured throughout the year. At the end of the year, there will be recognition and awards for progress.

"One of the benefits of this program is that there is grant money available," Parker said.

The program is also about educating business owners about what can and can't be recycled. For example, left over sheet rock and copper from construction projects are recyclable, Parker said.

"We're not building Houston as fast as we were 10 years ago, but there's still building going on," Parker said. "A lot of leftover materials used in building projects can be recycled. I'm not sure if a lot of people are aware of that."

Have a question for mayor Parker?
Send it to
hrnewsletter@cityofhouston.net
or call 713-837-9383.

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These projects dovetail with the city's urban gardener community program started several years ago in Parks and Recreation. That program encourages community groups to turn empty city lots into gardens.

The city's efforts have garnered praise from national experts on sustainability and food production.

Eric Schlosser, author of "Fast Food Nation" and a nationally known advocate of community gardens, said the movement toward healthy eating starts with governments like Houston providing a template.

"It's quintessentially American," Schlosser said of the sustainability movement. "It's about self-reliance, independence and community. This is a movement that has gained a lot of traction, and I don't see it going away."

"The United States is facing an epidemic of obesity, diabetes and overall poor health. Things like this are an essential first step in reducing these epidemics," he said.

Parks and Recreation Director Joe Turner said the movement toward local gardening isn't as complicated as people think it is.

"It's simple to grow a garden," Turner said. "But first you have to get off the couch."

City projects

The goal of the vegetable garden at 611



Local farmers sell produce at the City Hall farmers market. So far, the weekly event has been a success, with most vendors selling all of their produce.

Walker was to show Houstonians that a vegetable garden can be started and maintained in any kind of environment. Even in a downtown environment with lots of concrete, intermittent sunlight peeking through buildings and not much ground moisture.

The victory garden is already a destination for downtown visitors. Adding more green space to the area makes it all the more appealing, Parker said.

"What gets people out and into a park? Things to do," Parker said. "This fits here. It's not just plunking something randomly down inside a park."

The farmers market has been held every Wednesday since September in front of City Hall. So far, it has been a success, with most vendors selling their produce,

said Callie Hastings, development director of Urban Harvest, the local non-profit that helped the city plan the event. However, a decision hasn't been made on whether to continue it.

"Texas has been a little behind other areas in the food-sustainability movement," Hastings said. "(But) the city has made it much easier for us to do projects like this. Mayor Parker's sustainability office has been a big help with policies

and explaining how to do events like this."

Urban Harvest also goes into neighborhoods, educating community groups and schools about healthy eating.

Local groups key

Local groups are key to creating a sustainable city, Schlosser said.

"Get into the neighborhoods," he said. "Get the schools involved. Get the

churches involved. A lot of this has to do with education. And when you have a government involved, it only helps."

Overseeing all of these projects is the city's first director of sustainability, a position created by Mayor Parker.

"It is important to buy local," said Laura Spanjian, director of sustainability. "You know where that food is coming from, and you know the sources of it. I want people to learn how easy it is, how simple it is, to grow their food in their garden."

Brent Moon, a horticulturist, and other parks employees serve as resources for groups interested in urban gardening.

"I think it's something that has grown quite a bit," Moon said of the local food trend. "I think for a while a lot of people thought it was a fad. But I think a lot of people want to know where their food is coming from."

Moon, who advises several garden groups, said the urban farmer program began in April 2008 under former Mayor Bill White.

"You have the whole push for recycling and doing more on less land," Moon said. "I think sustainability is becoming more and more important, and I think people are starting to understand it more."

The Urban Gardening Program provides opportunities for community groups to transform select gardening spots in parks into community gardens, with the assistance of the urban gardener.

To learn more, contact theurbangardener@houston.tx.gov or visit www.houston.tx.gov/parks/urbangardener/urbangardener_About.html

Please note: Gardners are responsible for obtaining all resources for the garden.

ANTI-GANG continued from page 1

Ponce was being initiated into his new family. His father left when he was 2, and his mother worked all day. Babysitters paid him little attention, so Ponce sought it on the streets of southwest Houston. He soon learned about gang life.

"They gave me love, recognition, money and protection," he said.

He wanted what they had: tattoos, money, style. Trouble.

He dabbled in drugs and alcohol, got in fights, robbed people and did poorly in school. In an alternative school, he met Victor Gonzalez, then a gang-intervention specialist with the Mayor's Anti-Gang Office.

The office, through an array of programs and services for youths, families and communities, prevents youngsters from joining gangs and helps them leave.

Ponce had seen Gonzalez around the neighborhood and school, talking with his friends. His approach to hardened,

mistrustful gang members was effective, getting them to listen and ask for help, Ponce said.

Gonzalez talked to Ponce, then 14, and offered the office's services.

Ponce didn't want to hear what Gonzalez was saying. But part of him knew it made sense, and he kept Gonzalez's number. They talked periodically until Ponce, at 16, was arrested for aggravated robbery and sent to the Texas Youth Commission. There, he learned about discipline and structure.

When he got out after 17 months, Ponce avoided Gonzalez because he didn't want to hear that he'd disappointed him.

But for Ponce, it was going to get worse.

After a night of drinking in May 2004, Ponce, then 19, left a club after 6 a.m. As he turned onto Alameda from the Beltway feeder, he passed out.

His Kia Sportage rolled several times, and his girlfriend, Estella Lopez, flew out the front window and died instantly.

Ponce broke most of his ribs, fractured

his skull, and broke his spine. He was paralyzed from the waist down.

His "homeboys" ignored him during his two months in the hospital. When he got out, he was alone.

A couple of nights later, a nightmare woke him. He got the box of memories he kept in his closet, letters and photos and trinkets from friends — many dead or in jail.

The rest had abandoned him.

"Maybe my homeboys don't care about me the way I care for them," he realized. Gonzalez had been right.

"Because of that gang influence, I got into this mess," he said. "I've made people suffer. I need to make a change."

The next morning, he called Gonzalez. "I'm ready now. And I want to speak to kids."

Since then, he's given more than 200 presentations. He talks about what he saw growing up, what he felt, and the consequences of gang life. Nobody had told him about the consequences. He hopes to plant a seed that will grow and save

the students from his fate. Or one worse.

The students can see the truth of his words.

"He's such a powerful speaker," said Patricia Harrington, the Mayor's Anti-Gang Office supervisor.

One boy said he'd been thinking about quitting his gang, and after Ponce's presentation, he knew he wanted out. A girl said she now wanted a career in law enforcement.

"I've done something," Ponce said.

And, it's helping him, too. He's been able to build up what he'd torn down.

Harrington hired him as an administrative temp in November 2007. In early 2008, he became a city student intern. He's learning administrative and case-management skills and how to work in an office, Harrington said. And he gives them insight into how gang members think.

"I want to have a good life, a good future," he said. "This office has given me a positive family and true friends and the training I will need to become what I want to be."

Brooks keeps garbage trucks running

Solid waste workers need working collectors. That's where SWM mechanic comes in

By Dave Schafer

The garbage truck died on the road. The night-shift mechanic who towed it to Solid Waste Management's southwest center told Burgial Brooks it was "losing the prime," mechanic-speak for air flooding the fuel system.

Brooks, a mechanic III, starts the truck. That tells him air isn't in the line. More likely, it's a loose wire or an electrical short.

When he takes the truck for a test drive, it rattles, but it drives OK, not giving Brooks a clue to its ailment. Because the cherry picker is 12 years old, Brooks can't hook it up to the computer to determine the problem. He has to experience it.

"I'll find it," he says, as he pulls the truck up to the huge garage door. He leaves the truck running and pulls down the hood. His fingers, long and lean like the rest of him, pull lightly on the fuel shutdown solenoid, which pops off.

The truck stops running.

He may have found the problem. The solenoid shouldn't come off that easily. Whoever replaced it hadn't clamped it down properly.

Brooks, 55, has been working on vehicles since he was 14 and has dealt with



Photo by Dave Schafer

Burgial Brooks uses a crowbar to pry a worn pin out of a broken lift arm. Working with giant trucks takes skills Brooks has gained during his 17 years with the city. His passion is working on machines — cars, trucks, computers.

fuel shutdowns before. He's dealt with a lot of issues in his 17 years working on large vehicles with the city. And he discovers new ones every day.

"Giant trucks aren't like any other," he said. "You can't go to school for working on those."

Brute strength and intellectual challenges

The six day-shift mechanics at the southwest center keep the 90 to 100 garbage trucks that leave the center each day

running. When one of the trucks stops running, they try to get it back on the road the same day.

"You need Solid Waste to pick up the garbage," Brooks said. "And you need mechanics to keep the garbage trucks running."

At the SW center, they do everything except pull engines and transmissions. Those get done at the southeast center, which also has a rebuild shop. Because the city does everything in-house, it saves money and provides good quality, Brooks said.

Next, Brooks helps Renee Rodriguez, mechanic I, pull a lift cylinder off a loader arm. Brooks pries at the worn-down pin with a crowbar, his feet splashing in the water Rodriguez had sprayed to cool a pin he'd cut out with a cutting torch. Brooks wears safety goggles and gloves that once sported green-and-pink stripes but are now mostly gray and black.

The pin clanks on the ground. It's about a foot long and an inch thick.

While that took brute strength, Brooks really likes the thinking part of the job,

figuring out the problem.

"This is my passion," Brooks says, and a toothy smile spreads across his face. "I'm constantly buying myself new tools. There's nothing else I want to do."

The importance of family

His tools are in a red, five-and-half-foot tall, metallic rolling box. The toolbox has a boom box and pictures of his nine children and eight grandchildren. "This is my home," he says.

Family is the center of his world. And his co-workers, men around him in greasy overalls, are his family, too.

A call comes over the scratchy intercom: a broken-down garbage truck at Durhill and Buffalo Speedway. Towing a heavy truck can be dangerous, and Brooks is the only one on the day shift who does it.

But first, he checks if he can fix it.

"I feel like if I fix it, I've accomplished more," he says. "They can finish their route and go home."

He can't fix it — the u-joint in the steering shaft is defective. Soon the side loader's front wheels are dangling seven inches off the pavement, lifted by the thick chains Brooks has attached to its underside.

He heads back to the SW center. Other trucks are waiting. One with an oil leak, another with a tail light that won't work.

He has always told his children that more important than making money is having a job you love. He knows what that's like. **S**

For Narvaez, bomb squad work is precise, nerve-racking

By Andrew Guy Jr.

Fire in the hole!
Fire in the hole!

Fire in the hole!
If you ever hear this phrase yelled exactly three times, here's some advice: Run.

A bomb is about to be detonated, and Jack Bauer won't be swooping in with a pair of wire cutters like he did on "24."

That was television.

Bomb technician Robert Narvaez hears the alarm and scurries down the hall. He dons a pair of industrial ear muffs and waits. The explosion is so intense the pressure waves can be felt from 100 feet away. Dust flies everywhere; smoke fills the air; and ... is the building shaking?

After the smoke clears, Narvaez and his team walk to the door that contained the device. Not only has the bomb broken the lock, it has blown the door swing, the metal arm connecting the door to the frame at the top, several feet into the room, turning it into a projectile moving at several miles per hour.

"Man," Narvaez says, little-kid-like. "It took that sucker right off."

It did, but too much explosive was used. They gained access, but what if a hostage inside the locked room had been hit by the door swing?

"If we kill the hostages that kind of defeats the purpose," Navarez said.

Suddenly, fire alarms. Lights. Noise.

The sixth floor of the nearly abandoned building adjacent to M.D. Anderson Cancer Center is chaos. Soon, the sounds of fire trucks can be heard.

Narvaez looks perplexed.

"Shoot. Didn't anyone tell the Fire Department we were practicing today?"

Popular culture tends to glamorize bombs, and the people who detonate them. Bomb experts are often seen as renegade toughs inside the Police Department, called in when the villain has a timed explosive.

The truth: Bomb-squad work is complicated, precise and sometimes nerve-racking. In order to prepare for a potential threat, members of Houston's bomb squad train for several days each month, working a variety of scenarios.

"It's a lot of problem solving," Narvaez said. "There are a lot of different puzzles. It's not that we just go in and snip wires. It's a neat little science, actually."

If there is a hostage situation, they are immediately called to the scene in case they need to force access. They are also called when someone reports a suspicious package or activity.

They once received a call from someone who found a suspicious package on their porch, Navarez said. After evacuating the house, securing the yard and analyzing the package, they found a bottle of Crown Royal whiskey sent as a gift.

"That person felt embarrassed that they called us, but, it's better to be safe," Nar-



Photo by Andrew Guy Jr.

Robert Narvaez inspects a police car. His team planted a bomb in the car as part of training for the bomb squad unit.

vaez said. "For us, it's always a live learning experience. We train every month, but it's really helpful to get real calls about things that turn out to be bottles of Crown Royal."

They have X-rayed candy bars, teddy bears and coffee mugs.

The squad has one lieutenant, one sergeant and 12 bomb technicians. The unit doesn't have openings often. When there is one, they receive applications from officers already on the force. Applicants must take a vocational skills test.

Those chosen train for six weeks in Huntsville, Ala. They must also become certified as a hazardous materials technician.

Confidence is a must.

"If you're even slightly skittish or nervous, it's probably not the best job," Narvaez said. "It's not that we don't get scared. It's about knowing and trusting your confidence and training."

Earnest "Jack" Wiggins, the newest member of the squad, spent nine years as a Houston police officer before joining the team earlier this year. He said the challenge of the bomb team is what prompted him to apply.

"It's a different kind of job," Wiggins said. "You're blowing stuff up." **S**

What's goin' on

Housing and Community Development

Welcome new employee **David Kim** ... Housing hosted two public hearings regarding the 2011 Consolidated Action Plan Oct. 26 and Oct. 28. The plan helps the department allocate federal funds. The funds provide the following services to low- to moderate-income Houstonians: affordable housing, community development, neighborhood-facility improvement, and programs serving youth, the homeless, people living with AIDS, and those with special needs ... The department held two public hearings in October at the Sunnyside Multi-Service Center, 4605 Wilmington St., seeking input into the development of an application for another round of recovery funds from Hurricane Ike. The funds will be for rehabilitation or reconstruction of rental and single-family homes ... On Aug. 16, city officials joined residents and citizens to unveil a marker for the Independence Heights neighborhood in north Houston. Independence Heights, one of Houston's historical neighborhoods, was founded in 1915 to become the first incorporated African-American municipality in the Texas ... Mayor **Annise Parker**, along with Housing Director **Jim Noteware**, granted the demolition order for Candlelight Trails Condominiums in northwest Houston. Residents have complained about the complex for years. The demolition is expected to start the rebuilding of the Antoine corridor. ... The department's Combined Municipal Campaign effort kicked off by selling awareness ribbons. Staff purchased cause ribbons and wore them proudly. Department CMC committee members are **Ana Patino-Martinez, Andrea Smith, Karen Franklin, Kelli Hendricks, Maria Garcia, Nicky Smith, Stephaine Wrights** and **Valerie Watson** ... Police Chief **Charles McClelland** and other city officials celebrated a groundbreaking for the Fondren Police Station, 8605 Westpark Drive, Sept. 13. The new station will house 176 officers and civilians and serve a neighborhood of about 16 square miles and 124,000 residents. The construction is expected to be completed next August ... The department, Harris County Judge Ed Emmett and Councilman **James Rodriguez** celebrated the ribbon cutting at the Raul Yzaguirre School for Success at the Tejano Center for Community Concerns in August. The 7.5-acre campus includes additions and renovations of the existing elementary, middle and high-school buildings, a new gym and new landscaping. The three-story building is 49,866 square feet and has 16 middle-school and 21 high-school classrooms ... The department has launched new online initiatives on Facebook, www.facebook.com/HoustonHCDD, and Twitter, www.twitter.com/HoustonHCDD. – *Lester Whiteing*.



Human Resources Director Omar Reid felt the heat at Fire Ops 101, a one-day Fire Department orientation course for council members and their staffs.

General Services

Best wishes to **Fausto Ayala** and **Edward Boulter**, who recently retired ... Congratulations on promotions: **Marisol Medina, Roderick Williford, Keith Andrews, Alphonso Cardenas, Krystal Torres, Robin Berry, Francisca Torres** and **Shantel Atkins** ... Welcome new employees **Chigozie Orieh** and **Shantel Atkins**. Atkins transferred from Human Resources ... Congratulations on service awards: **Sylvester Walker**, 35 years; **Linda Gunn**, 25 years; **Robert Eadie, Stephanie Emmers, Russell Galbreath, Joe Garcia, Abdul Merchant** and **Barry Williams**, 20 years ... Congrats to **Marcus Sheppard**, who received a letter of commendation for his work on the Zina Garrison Academy project. – *Thomas Hollier*

Legal

Thank you **Patricia Harris** and **Mayzie Burke** for excellent work in a recent case ... Welcome new employees: **Jessica Eales, Loren Williams, Monica Flores, Kellee Johnson** and **Roosevelt Wright**. Kudos to **Terry Sauter**, for working endlessly to get 362 requests for proposals by 141 local law firms logged and recorded. – *Shirley Redwine*

Human Resources

To kick off the Combined Municipal Campaign, the department held a mini-agency fair complete with snow cones and popcorn sales. The department exceeded participation and contribution goals by raising more than \$31,000 with 97 percent participation. The response to the third-annual online auction gift basket contest between divisions was overwhelming. Fourteen gift baskets created by four divisions brought in \$1,375, more than previous years. E.B. Cape Center employees won the challenge by raising \$562 from auction sales of their baskets. The second year of Barkitecture raised more than \$12,000 for CMC agency Pup Squad. Thanks to department coordinators **Monique Adams, Robbin Duplessis, Ursula Garcia** and **Karina Tran** for a great job ... **Ramiro Cano** was promoted to deputy director, and **Jessica Rich** was promoted to executive office assistant ... **Enrique Boulouf** and **Amy Torres** were the first two winners of the Golden Frog Employee of the Month award for employees in the financial, purchasing and temporary services divisions. Employees are nominated by co-workers and selected by employees in those divisions ... **Brent Powell**, assistant director, is leading the reinventing HR project to centralize and standardize human resources functions throughout the city ... Welcome new employees **Shunte Washington, Ricky Collins** and **Bridgette Nabors** ... Good-bye **Cesar Cuellar**. – *Dave Schafer*

Public Works and Engineering

On Sept. 8, the department hosted a delegation from Johannesburg, South Africa. The visitors were interested in the city's automated meter-reading system. The delegation received an overview of the system, including the impact on customer service, billing accuracy and other issues ... Mayor **Annise Parker** opened the city's WaterWorks Education Center at the Northeast Water Park, 12121 North Sam Houston Parkway, Oct. 12. The facility promotes water education, conservation and stewardship in the community to help protect this vital resource. The center takes visitors through an interactive journey to learn how lake and river water are transformed into drinking water. Hands-on exhibits and lectures focused on water-related themes, including purification, distribution and methods of water protection. For more information about the education center and a map to the center visit the website at www.houstonwaterworks.org. – *Alvin Wright*



Mayor Annise Parker and other officials watch as the remnants of the Candlelight Trails Condominiums come down. Residents in that neighborhood have complained about the northwest Houston complex for years.

on in the city?

Convention and Entertainment Facilities

The James Baker Monument was unveiled at Sesqui-centennial Commons, behind the Wortham Center, Oct. 26 ... Former Houston Mayor Kathryn Whitmire was among the class of 2010 inductees in the Houston Hall of Fame at the George R. Brown Convention Center. She was enshrined Aug. 26 along with former Houston Astro Jose Cruz, retired astronaut Bernard Harris Jr. and Houston Texans owner Robert McNair ... GRB launched the mobile version of www.houstonconventionctr.com to provide internet access to conventioners using hand-held devices ... Small performing-arts groups and their patrons may now purchase tickets online to events at Wortham Center and Jones Hall thanks to a new ticketing system using Tessitura Software ... Congratulations to **Maria Escobar, Judy Daigle and Analisa Smith** for being named employees of the month ... Best wishes to **Art Zehnder**, who has resigned as sales director at the George R. Brown to take another job in Minnesota ...



Jackie Dishaw

than a decade. She retired June 1. She is survived by her husband, Donald, and two grown children, Nicole and Jack. — *Pete Radowick*

Library

Congratulations on promotions: **Ginger Vazquez, Gail Ibarra, Regina Latson, Jonathan Bisso, and Sandra August** ... Happy retirement to **Beatrice Temp** ... Library Director **Rhea Brown Lawson** has named **Patricia “Paty” Bustamante** as the new chief of Central Library. “I am confident that Paty has the leadership skills, creativity, talent, and passion to move Central Library to the next level. She is forward-thinking and compassionate – a good mix for an urban public library leader,” Lawson said ... Library has received a \$3.7 million federal grant from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration to upgrade and expand computing and internet capabilities in neighborhoods around Houston. The grant, matched by \$2.2 million in funds from partnering entities, will allow HPL to provide Houstonians with greater access to broadband internet access and learning and economic opportunities through the city’s Digital Inclusion Initiative Wireless Empowered Community Access Network ... HPL can help with holiday plans for free. Visit any neighborhood library to find a large selection of some of the best recipes plus decorating and entertaining books full of unique ideas for the holidays. — *Blanca Quezada*

Municipal Courts

Mayor **Annis Parker** and City Council combined the former Municipal Courts Judicial and Municipal Courts Administration departments into one department, the Municipal Courts Department. The department will be led by Barbara Hartle. “The primary reason for the consolidation is to streamline court services and leadership under one authority,” Parker said. Sahira Abdool, former MCA director, will serve as deputy director and clerk of the court ... Municipal Courts celebrated Municipal Courts Week in November. The statewide program helps the public understand the role of municipal courts. — *Shameka Barnaba-LaDay*

Mayor’s Office

Mayor **Annis Parker** named **Terry Garrison** fire chief. Garrison worked for the Phoenix Fire Department for more than 30 years, as a fire/arson investigator and to assistant chief of the operations division. He then served as fire chief in Oceanside, Calif., and most recently as interim chief and assistant chief for the Daisy Mountain Fire District in Arizona ... The mayor and Councilman **Mike Sullivan** applauded and thanked the U.S. House of Representatives for taking action to preserve human space flight. By a vote of 304-118, the U.S. House approved Senate Bill 3729, a compromise measure crafted by Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas. The bill will extend international space station operations to 2020, add an additional space shuttle flight to the two flights already scheduled before the fleet is retired in 2011 and fund development of a deep-space rocket and crew capsule by 2016 ... The mayor announced the creation of a blue-ribbon task force to oversee the enforcement of building ordinances in Houston. Among those named were **Tom Allen**, Legal, and **Maria Casanova**, Municipal Courts judge. The Building and Standards Commission was created in 1993 for the purpose of hearing and determining cases concerning alleged violations of ordinances relating to dangerously damaged or deteriorated buildings or improvements, or conditions caused by accumulations of refuse, vegetation, or other matter that creates breeding and living places for insects and rodents. The mayor’s task force will make recommendations to reinforce the effectiveness of the commission ... The mayor appointed **Cameron Waldner** to serve as the city’s first chief service officer. Waldner, a member of the city’s senior leadership team, will develop and implement a citywide plan to increase volunteerism and to target volunteers to address the city’s greatest needs. Waldner previously served as director of the Volunteer Initiatives Program ... In September, the mayor testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation to support Senate bill 3756. The bill would create a national public-safety network on using broadband technology. It would also provide a uniform communication system for first responders instead of the current system of various networks on different radio frequencies.

— *Janice Evans*

Obituaries

Darlene Williams, Solid Waste Management, died Oct. 4. Williams faithfully served the citizens of Houston in her 16 years of employment. She was a valuable and dedicated public servant.



Williams began working for the city Aug. 4, 1994. Her last position was as the department’s City Council liaison. In that role, she assisted the Mayor’s Office and councilmembers with residents’ concerns. Before coming to Solid Waste in 2006, she worked in the Mayor’s Office and the Finance and Administration Department.

Health and Human Services

Department employees visited more than 7,000 households in Acres Homes Oct. 14 – 16 and distributed information packets about neighborhood resources and programs. The visits were part of an assessment, intervention and mobilization project to improve the ability of Acres Homes residents to manage their health. Before launching the program, the department surveyed residents and held focus groups to identify health-related issues and the community’s needs ... The Latino HIV task force offered free HIV tests in various Houston neighborhoods Oct. 15 as part of National Latino AIDS Awareness Day. The task force, comprised of health agencies and community-based organizations, administer HIV and AIDS prevention programs. Health created the task force in 2002 to educate and raise awareness of HIV, AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases among Hispanics.

— *Porfirio Villarreal*



Department coordinators from across the city participated in Combined Municipal Campaign coordinator training Sept. 24, followed by a successful agency fair at Hermann Square. More than 75 agencies attended the fair to help kick off the campaign.

Departments give a bad RAP to injuries

Under the Resource Allocation Program, reducing workplace accidents can earn reward money

By Andrew Guy Jr

For years, departments have worked to reduce on-the-job accidents. Making employees free from injury is the hallmark of a safe workplace.

Now, the city has a new program that takes that goal a step further – reward money.

The Resource Allocation Program will track injuries in every department. After the end of one year, departments that have reduced injuries by at least 15 percent will receive a reward.

Essentially, the program takes money that would have been spent on worker's compensation, medical and other claims and gives it back to the department.

Each department knows the specific drivers that will cause their employees to work safer, said Kim Smith, Human Resources safety division manager. “We think we can reduce the number of acci-

dents by 15 percent. We then want to be able to give that 15 percent back to the departments.”

The departments can use that money for safety-related items and events, Smith said.

It will be like a grant, Smith said. They will submit a letter to a committee describing how the money would be used to improve safety in the department.

The program runs through FY 2011 and the goal is to eliminate about 358 injuries a year, nearly one injury per day, Smith said. That would save the city about \$1.2 million the first year.

Initially, \$300,000 will be set aside as reward money, Smith said. Fifteen percent may not seem like a big number, but it is. Over the past five years, the city has averaged 2,383 injuries.

The city got the idea from the Univer-

sity of Texas System, which implemented a similar program in 1997. Since then, UT has saved more than \$40 million across

“We think we can reduce the number of accidents by 15 percent. We then want to be able to give that 15 percent back to the departments.”

- Kim Smith
HR safety division manager

all of its campuses and drastically reduced accident rates, said Phil Dendy, director of risk management for the UT system.

“It’s a great program,” Dendy said.

“We thought we would implement this and it would last three, four years. But it’s become very successful.”

Dendy said that UT system has 100,000 employees and has spent \$5 million on total medical benefits in FY 2010. He attributes that relatively low amount to their injury-reduction program.

But Smith said the program’s advantage isn’t just about saving money. Employees also benefit from a safer workplace.

“If you are injured today, it’s not only going to change your life, but also your family’s life,” Smith said. “Accidents can change lives in a lot of ways, so to change a life a day by reducing accidents by one a day is great.”

LEGAL continued from page 1

plea bargained, continued or dismissed, Segall said. Only one or two per court go to trial each day.

Segall monitors the courts from his office. He watches plea bargains to make sure they are consistent and follow city policy, helps keep the courts organized and moves prosecutors and cases around to different courts.

“Our focus is to make sure that justice is done,” he said. “It’s not always about getting a conviction. It’s about doing the right thing.”

City lawyers, who handle cases on more than 4,000 different charges, have to be flexible and open-minded, Sarrafian said.

But not all those fast-thinking lawyers are city employees. Segall started and oversees the Houston Volunteer Prosecutor Program, where volunteer lawyers from local law firms spend one day a week prosecuting jury cases in municipal courts.

That gives the city four extra full-time lawyers without the added salary, Segall said. They get experience trying cases before a jury, which can be hard to get in big law firms.

The program saves the city about \$400,000 a year, he estimates.

Behind the curtains

Prosecutors also have to build their cases, and they do that with the help of Police, Public Works and Engineering, and other city departments.

Department lawyers specialize in different areas. Josh Schneider specializes in fire ordinances, Jamie Huntley in sound ordinances, Wynetta Chaney in family-violence ordinances, and Sarrafian in game-room ordinances and getting owners of blighted apartment complexes to appear for a hearing, no matter how far from Houston they are.

Because the city cannot arrest a company, it needs a representative of the company here. With the help of PWE inspectors and members of Police’s derivative response team, Sarrafian builds a case against the owners, often driving out to inspect the blighted complex. Then, he drafts a summons and sends it to the law-enforcement agency where the company is based. The farthest has been New Jersey.

“Those guys think they are out of reach,” he said. “But they’re not.”

Segall gets into the courtroom a couple times a month, when he’s training the volunteer lawyers and during special cases. But he’s constantly immersed in court business. He’s the liaison for various HPD divisions, including narcot-



Donna Edmonson, left, and Louis Rossitto, right, confer with neighborhood protection’s Herbert Williams and Vicki Newsom while walking a neighborhood and recording code violations. City attorneys work with departments and residents to improve quality of life.

Photo by Dave Schafer

“We’re the catch-all,” Calabrese said. “People call me for legal advice on anything.”

Like others in Legal, she works set hours that aren’t really set and can stretch late into the evening. Most projects are time-sensitive.

In October, she was preparing legal opinions dealing with the charter amendments in the November election. She’ll also help departments understand how the new amendments affect them.

She’s also writing ordinances for redistricting and meeting with outside consultants. The city will likely add two new council districts by next July.

“I really enjoy working on hot issues,” she said. “It’s a lot of fun.”

Helping to build better communities

The day ends in the neighborhoods, with lawyers from the neighborhood services section at civic associations and super neighborhood meetings

explaining what the section does, how they can help the residents, and how the residents can help them.

They work on some deed-restriction issues, such as private houses used for businesses, size and number of structures on a property, setback of structures from the road and other properties, orientation of houses, fences that require building permits, protest and appeal of alcohol-license applications, making sure sexually oriented businesses are legal and in compliance, and that apartment- and house-owners follow the building code.

“It’s about working together,” said Edmonson. “It’s a big city. The bottom line is we all work for the citizens.”

ics, and the go-to man for legal advice.

He’s answering his constantly ringing Blackberry from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m., he said.

“There’s a tremendous amount of work, but never a dull moment,” said Segall, who’s been with the city for 26 years.

Giving counsel

Tracey Calabrese is the expert on city charter amendments, record-retention issues, social media, street parking and election procedures. And very soon, she’ll be an expert on redistricting.

The members of the general counsel section help departments, City Council and Mayor Annise Parker with legal issues. Before noon on a recent day, Calabrese, a senior assistant city attorney III, had spoken to people from the Harris County Elections Board, Planning and Development, HPD, Parks, ARA and the City Secretary’s Office.



Photo by Dave Schafer

Eric Sarrafian, center right, files a continuance motion with the judge during court. Sarrafian and other city attorneys prosecute class C misdemeanors and enforce city ordinances.



We asked employees: **What is your favorite Thanksgiving or holiday memory?**

LaQuita Pruitt, Public Works and Engineering:



"I remember our big, three-story home in St. Charles, Mo. There were four girls. It was so much fun as adults returning to our home

for Thanksgiving and just having 'adult big-time' fun! The fun, laughter, food, fellowship, late nights, and just plain loving each other and reminiscing – even the arguments were fun! To now have the grandchildren, nieces and nephews joining us in this celebration of 'thanks.' We had it all!"

Falisia Sims, Solid Waste Management:

"Thanksgiving 2005. This was the first year my husband and I had moved in together. He has a big, close family, so he designated our house for Thanksgiving dinner. I had never made a Thanksgiving meal in my life and I had about 35 people coming. I started the night before and finished on Thanksgiving Day. To my surprise, everything turned out great. Our family and friends loved it."



Elizabeth Rodriguez, Human Resources:



"The final holiday with my father is most cherished. He passed away in 2004. Thanksgiving and Christmas 2003 were especially significant. I remember the big

hug he greeted me with. We spent hours talking, laughing and carried on into the late hours of the night, so late he and a few other siblings had to spend the night – both times."

Layla Harlow, Houston Emergency Center:

"At Thanksgiving dinner, there's all kinds of food. At the end of the table would be a bowl of peas. I don't know who my aunt thought would eat them. No one liked them. I think she just liked to watch them fly across the table in a 'battle of the pea catapults' instigated by my uncle and a spoon. To this day there is always a small, almost child size, bowl of peas at the end of the table."



Market Square reconnects with past and residents



For more than 60 years, City Hall sat atop the market where residents bought food, livestock and other essentials. Above left is the third City Hall/market square, which later became a bus terminal. Today, the block is a newly renovated park with art, benches, shade and a Niko Niko's restaurant. Photo courtesy of Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

By Dave Schafer

After almost 100 years and \$3 million in renovations, Market Square is once again a gathering place for Houstonians.

Until the 1920s, Market Square boasted the city's market house and City Hall. Food vendors were required to sell in a public market controlled by city ordinances, according to a 2007 Houston Business Journal article.

"Market Square was the retail center of the town," said historian and retired Finance and Administration records management officer Louis Aulbach. "It provided the basic needs of the citizens. It was the place where they could get dry goods, meats, livestock, everything that was essential for residents."

The first market house was built in 1840. It was joined a year later by City Hall. In 1873, the city built a combination City Hall and market house, with municipal offices above the market. That building burned down three years later, much of the city's early records lost to that fire, Aulbach said.

The building that replaced it also burned down in 1901 and was replaced with another one in 1904. That one, too, would feel the lick of flames, but not until

long after its use as City Hall was ended.

The down times

In the 1920s, the city's retail center shifted south.

The current City Hall opened on Bagby in 1938, and in the '40s and '50s the Market Square building served as a bus terminal.

After the old City Hall/market house building burned and was demolished in 1960, the city planned to sell the land to developers to build a hotel, but a civic group advocated turning it into a park, said Minnette Boesel, mayor's assistant for cultural affairs.

City leaders must have misheard. They turned it into a parking lot for what would, by the late '60s, be the center of bustling activity with hopping nightclubs, cabarets, shops and more than 60 restaurants, according to news clippings.

That didn't last: By 1975, it was home to "a few strip joints, porn parlors and gimmick shops ... in paint-peeling dilapidation," a Chronicle article said.

In 1976, The Junior League of Houston turned the parking lot into a park with trees and bumps of dirt that created walking paths but blocked sight lines and prevented the park from being a place where the community could gather, Boesel said.

In the early '90s, the city and DiverseWorks, a nonprofit art center, converted Market Square into an art park.

But, Aulbach said, people still didn't have a reason to be there.

The new park

Now, Market Square Park boasts a dog park, a memorial garden in honor of Lauren Catuzzi Grandcolas – a passenger on United Flight 93 – flowing water fixtures, colorful tile benches, sidewalks paved with historic architectural fragments, archival photographs, a soaring 30-foot-tall steel and wood sculpture, and a Niko Niko's restaurant.

"We were hoping people who lived in the area would use it as a community gathering place and people from outside downtown would come to it to see this incredibly well-designed green space," Boesel said. "And it's working."

During the day, the park is full of lunchers and loungers. Once or twice a month, it hosts the free Houston Sound Fall Concert Series.

The park was renovated in a partnership between the Downtown Redevelopment Authority/TIRZ #3 and the Houston Downtown Management District, with private funds from the Lauren Catuzzi Grandcolas foundation. **S**

beckhead

by Paul Beckman





Bravo!

Congratulations to **Brenda Davis**, Health and Human Services, **Carolyn Paige**, Planning and Development, **Al Needham**, Library and **Carl Davis**, Planning and Development, who were selected as BRAVO! Award Winners for excellent work and contributions to the community. For more information, visit www.houstontx.gov/bravo/index.html.

Mayor honors police officer for her community work

Mayor **Annis Parker** honored **Dee Leal**, a Houston Police officer, for being a 2010 Hispanic Heritage award recipient. Leal was honored for spearheading the Houston Police Organization of Spanish Speaking Officers scholarship program, volunteering her time to aid officers injured in the line of duty and ensuring that children from needy families receive gifts at Christmas.

Granted money for new officers

HPD was awarded a \$10 million grant to help hire additional police officers. The grant, awarded by the U.S. Department of Justice, will cover salary and benefits for 50 new officers over the next three years. The funding is provided by the DOJ's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

"We will spend these dollars wisely, continuing the strict fiscal stewardship that has kept Houston from having to follow other major cities in furloughing or laying off police during these tough economic times," Mayor Annis Parker said.

HPD is one of 379 police and sheriff's departments in the U.S. and Puerto Rico that received the grant. Houston is the only major Texas city to receive funding this time, and one of only five cities receiving funding for 50 officers, the maximum allowed.

City earns water quality award

The Texas Department of State Health Services announced that the city of Houston received a Water Fluoridation Quality Award from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This award recognizes communities that maintained a consistent level of optimally fluoridated water throughout 2009 based on submittal of monthly fluoridation reports to the Texas Fluoridation Project.

Pressing on about the best branch

The McGovern-Stella Link library branch won the Houston Press Best Public Library Branch in its annual Best of Houston awards.

Innovative communications

The city's employee communications program won a Texas Municipal League Municipal Excellence Award in the management innovations category. Staff Members are **Leslie Denton-Roach**, publications manager, **Dave Schafer** and **Andrew Guy Jr.**, writers and editors, and **Jason Pickrell**, graphic designer.

Good idea to reduce fleet costs

Finance's Houston Fleet Share program was selected as a "Bright Idea" in Harvard University's inaugural Bright Ideas program recognizing creative and promising government programs and partnerships. Estimates show the fleet-share program will reduce the cost of the downtown fleet from 43 cents per mile to just 16 cents per mile and provide more consistent and reliable service to employees.

A cape of flexibility

The E.B. Cape Center won an Alfred P. Sloan Award for business excellence in workplace flexibility from the Flexible Workplace Initiative. The award recognizes employers that use workplace flexibility to increase effectiveness.

Prescription drugs for all Houstonians

Mayor **Annis Parker** announced a new discount prescription-drug card program for all Houstonians regardless of income, age or health status. This program is separate from the employee benefits plans. The Coast2Coast Rx card is part of a public/private partnership involving the city and the Heinz Foundation and Financial Marketing Concepts Inc., the card issuer.

The free cards will be available at city health clinics, multi-service centers and libraries as well as hospitals, urgent-care centers and pharmacies. Cardholders take the card to the pharmacy or get the card at the pharmacy when they fill a prescription.

There is no registration process other than what the pharmacies need to process a prescription. Residents can print and download a card at www.coast2coastrx.com. Go to the "print free card" menu, select "cities" and print the Coast2Coast Rx card.

Library program offers help with money issues

"More Money @ your library" is a financial literacy program that offers free financial workshops and other resources to help Houstonians take charge of their finances.

The Houston Public Library will be working with the Women's Resource Center of Greater Houston, University of Houston Human Development and Consumer Science Department, the Federal Reserve, the FDIC, and Money Management International to provide a bilingual financial-education series for Houston's English- and Spanish-speaking families.

HPL was one of only 19 systems nationwide to be selected for participation.

This program is funded through a grant awarded to HPL by the American Library Association and the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority Investor Education Foundation as part of the "Smart investing @ your library" program.

For a complete list of "More Money @ your library" January 2011 classes and programs, visit www.houstonlibrary.org/moremoney or call 832-393-1313.

Give a BRAVO! to a worthy co-worker

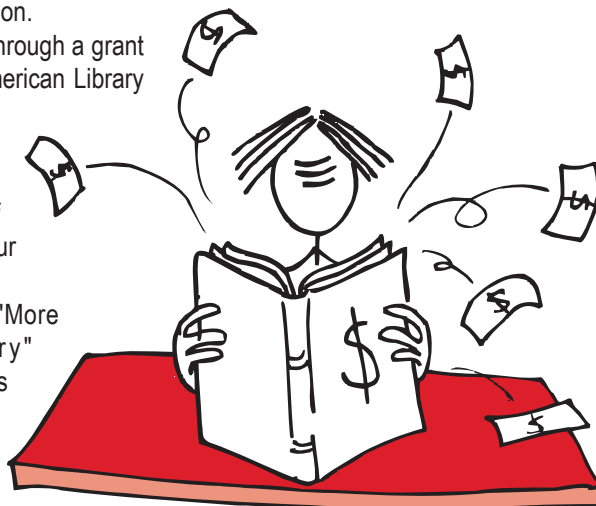
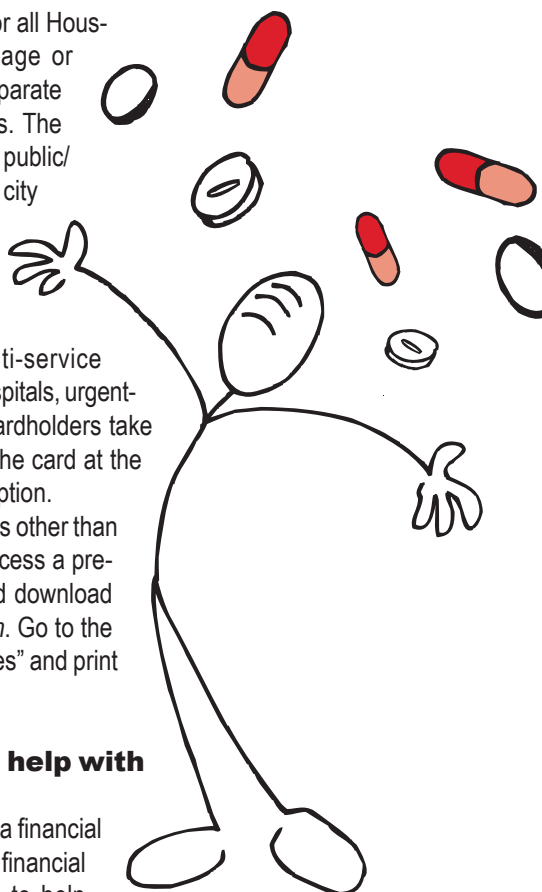
Do you know impressive co-workers who deserves recognition? Nominate them for a BRAVO! Award, the city's highest employee honor. Presented twice a year, BRAVO! recognizes employees for dedication to their jobs and to their community – both on the clock and off.

Anyone can submit a nomination, and everyone appreciates a pat on the back. So visit www.houstontx.gov/bravo/bravoforms.htm and fill out the form to nominate the next winner. Give that employee who works so hard to excel a BRAVO!

2011 Holiday Schedule

New Year's Day (Observed)	Monday, Jan. 3
Martin Luther King, Jr. Day	Monday, Jan. 17
Memorial Day	Monday, May 30
Independence Day	Monday, July 4
Labor Day	Monday, Sept. 5
Veterans Day	Friday, Nov. 11
Thanksgiving Day	Thursday, Nov. 24
Day After Thanksgiving	Friday, Nov. 25
Christmas Eve (Observed)	Friday, Dec. 23
Christmas (Observed)	Monday, Dec. 26

Plus one floating holiday for municipal employees and classified police employees, and one floating holiday for firefighters designated as "Sept. 11 Floating Holiday."



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